Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture · Vol 8.1 · December 2014 · 29-62

Gender Bias and Resistance in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls' Trilogy*[❖]

Tsung-Chi Chang[*]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the gender bias and resistance in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls' Trilogy*. Writing fictional narratives that are set against mid-20th-century Irish patriarchal culture, O'Brien shows how her protagonist Caithleen both conforms to and rebels against the yoke imposed on modern Irish women. By discussing the different roles played by males and females in traditional Irish society, I investigate the ways in which Caithleen is ensnared within the intricate webs of patriarchal power relations from family, religion, and society and how the protagonist manages to unsettle the time-honored patriarchy peculiar to Irish society. Introduction and conclusion aside, this paper falls into four parts. Part one sets O'Brien's female characters against the tradition of modern Irish women. Part two examines the intimidating father image by discussing a range of father figures in O'Brien's trilogy. In part three, the connection between Irish women and the Catholic religion is illustrated. Part four further explains how O'Brien's female characters suffer amid the patriarchal culture and how they endeavor to find their way out of patriarchy.

KEYWORDS: Edna O'Brien, *Country Girls' Trilogy*, gender bias and resistance

---

❖ This paper derives from the second chapter of my unpublished PhD thesis ("Women, Power, and Representation"). In addition, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their valuable feedback.

[*] Received: March 27, 2013; Accepted: October 15, 2014
Tsung-Chi Chang, Assistant Professor, Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong
E-mail: hawkchang2001@yahoo.com.tw

歐布萊恩《鄉村女孩三部曲》中的性別偏見與抵抗

張崇旂*

摘　要

本文探討愛爾蘭女作家歐布萊恩小說《鄉村女孩三部曲》中的性別偏見與抵抗。故事背景發生在二十世紀中期的愛爾蘭，主要描述的是女主角凱撒琳飽受父權社會壓迫之苦，以及她如何反抗性別偏見。論文從愛爾蘭傳統男女的性別角色出發，思考女主角如何試圖在家庭、宗教、和社會的父權體系當中，衝撞愛爾蘭行之以久的父權文化。除了前言與結語之外，本文共計四個部分。第一部分從現代愛爾蘭女性傳統的角度出發，探討歐布萊恩小說裡面的女性角色。第二部分討論小說裡面不同的父權角色，藉以檢視故事當中令人畏懼的父親形象。第三部分說明愛爾蘭女性和天主宗教的關聯。最後一部分則進一步解釋小說中女性在父權文化裡面遭遇的困境，以及女主角試圖跳脫限制所作的努力。

關鍵字：歐布萊恩、《鄉村女孩三部曲》、性別偏見與抵抗

* 張崇旂，香港教育學院文學與文化學系助理教授。
E-mail: hawkchang2001@yahoo.com.tw

I. Introduction

Though well-known in modern and contemporary Irish literature, O'Brien's works receive comparatively rare attention from literary critics (Greenwood 1-10; Pelan 67-68). Of the discussions so far, many commentators take her writings as mere reflections of her personal life, equating the fictional characters with their creator while overlooking their artistic values.[1] The first collection of critical essays on her writings was not available until late in 2006. O'Brien has been a controversial writer in Ireland since the publication of her first fiction, *The Country Girls*, in 1960. Against the secluded, conservative Catholic society, she was vilified for her audacious portrayals of the sex lives of women. The Minister of Culture at that time went so far as to call O'Brien "a smear of Irish womanhood," instigating mobs to burn her fictions in her hometown parish in Limerick (Fannin 7). So inflammatory were her works that many of them were censored in Ireland, including *The Country Girls Trilogy* and six subsequent works. Disappointed at the ban on her fictions, O'Brien left Ireland and kept writing in London most of the time. The self-exile, however, did not stop her from writing for Irish women, especially women in the western counties. When asked why she left her motherland, O'Brien replied: "I left Ireland because my first books were banned. I was frightened; and the climate of censorship was strangulating. But although you physically leave the country, mentally you bring it with you."[2] O'Brien's novels concerning the lives and developments of women are characterized by Catholic women's longing for love and sex, their rage at moral bondage, and the unfavorable bias against rape and abortion in modern Ireland. These discussions, though at odds with the purified image of women proposed by the Catholic Church, realistically mirror the lives of modern Irish women manipulated in the patriarchal society.

The Country Girls Trilogy, comprised of *The Country Girls*, *The Lonely Girl* (or *Girl with Green Eyes*), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, serves as a

[1] In her comments made on O'Brien's works, for example, Grace Eckley follows an autobiographical approach. In her analysis of *The Lonely Girl*, she proclaims that Eugene Gailard, the main character in the second fiction of the trilogy, in fact insinuates O'Brien's husband, Ernest Gebler (14).

[2] http://www.lectures.org/obrien.html. The case of O'Brien smacks of that of James Joyce. Though both of them are exiled for most of their mature years, with Joyce in Paris and O'Brien in London, their works never move beyond the boisterous yet endearing Ireland. In fact, O'Brien is so smitten by Joyce's writing that she even wrote a well-known biography, *James Joyce*, for Joyce.

good example in scrutinizing O'Brien' s portrayal of women's position in modern Irish society, the repressive nature of their upbringing and the concomitant lack of fulfillment. However, despite all the adversity, women characters like Caithleen in the trilogy are brave enough to challenge the male-dominated culture either by ingenious getaway or by standing up to the injustice imposed on them. Siobhan Kilfeather maintains that *The Country Girls Trilogy* represents Irish women's new awareness of their mistreatment in the 1960s, though such a re-awakening and the consequent reaction against patriarchy are slow (108). In this paper, my argument is that for women like Caithleen, modern Irish society is structured like a prison in which they are constantly circumscribed and interrogated. But in response to such patriarchal power exertions, a counter force inevitably comes from these underprivileged female subjects, though the result may not live up to their expectations of love and happiness.

II. Irish Women and Mother Ireland

O'Brien has been interested in discussing Irish women's images and problems. In her autobiographical work titled *Mother Ireland*, she puts forward her critical reflection on her mother land. According to O'Brien, Ireland is a woman. "Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare" (12).[3] These negative images of women remind us of Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays, Nora in J.M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, and the mother in Lady Gregory's *The Travelling Man*. Although these female characters come in different forms, all of them, as symbols of Ireland, have to sacrifice themselves for the benefits of their family and their country. Confronted with this pre-arranged imprisonment, most women resign themselves to fate. However, some women determine to fight for their own survival. For example, Nora in J.M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* craves for a promising future with outsiders instead of succumbing to her husband's dominance in the desolate countryside. Nonetheless, not all women are

[3] The images of Ireland and Irish history, suggests Werner Huber, play an important part in O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*. "They help to define personal identity via a definition of national identity, the assumption being that in Irish autobiographies personal and national identity often go together" (Huber 176).

fortunate enough to break free from patriarchal control. In Lady Gregory's play *The Gaol Gate*, despite their efforts to save Denis Cahel's life, female characters such as Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin are constantly subject to male-dominated rule.

In connection with the disadvantaged female characters prevalent in modern Irish literature, *Mother Ireland* testifies to the fact that Ireland is fixed stereotypically as a woman. In addition, whereas their male counterparts are engrossed in drinking, Irish women are overburdened with duties and traditions. O'Brien's deliberation highlights the stark contrast between men and women in Ireland:

> Loneliness, the longing for adventure, the Romantic Catholic Church, or the family tie that is more umbilical than among any other race on earth? The martyred Irish mother and the raving rollicking Irish father are not peculiar to the works of exorcized writers but common families throughout the land. (*Mother Ireland* 19)

As O'Brien depicts in the other fictions, *The Country Girls Trilogy* unveils the overwhelming pressure saddled on modern Irish women, be it from family, church, or nation. Overall, the three fictions depict the adventures of Caithleen Brady (Kate) and Bridget Brennan (Baba), who escape from their Irish hometown and convent school to Dublin and then to London to search for their ideal love. However, the hardship, temptation, and fleeting happiness they experience help them realize they are destined to frustration and disillusionment. Man-centered power operations penetrate all the textures of Kate's life, which accords with Michel Foucault's concept that power is flowing, capricious, and pervasive. According to Foucault, via a range of struggle, confrontation, and adaptation, power exerts control over the subjugation and affiliation of the other, and thus makes itself the mouthpiece of knowledge and truth (*The History of Sexuality* 92-93).

In the trilogy, the patriarchal power surrounds and restricts Caithleen in the form of her father, her lovers, the Catholic religion, and so on. To a great extent, Caithleen's life is comprised of her aspirations toward love, her struggle against conventions, and her wretchedness brought about by a long list of male rogues, including her drunken father, Mr. Gentleman, Eugene

Gaillard, and Duncan. Segregated in a wide variety of suppressing man-oriented surroundings, Caithleen can barely survive, let alone create a world of her own. In reality, Caithleen's predicament is foreshadowed in the life of her mother, who has long been victimized by her drunken father. In *The Country Girls*, the first part of the trilogy, Caithleen once recounts her mother's unwillingness to sleep with her father due to her fear (50). Her mother falters because she undergoes many traumatizing experiences in her interaction with her brutal husband. She has been suffering from domestic violence for a long time, falling prey to the patriarchal culture in modern Ireland. Sexual love brings less pleasure than sorrow to her. Compared with all the other characters in *The Country Girls*, Caithleen's mother is rarely mentioned. So obedient is this mother figure that her husband always has his own way. What is worse, her death by drowning early in the story kicks her out of the game and silences her for good.

In stark contrast to her father that is bossy and savage, Caithleen's mother invariably takes the secondary place. She is often obsessed with distress (6). Waiting for her husband to come home, coughing due to her illness, and crying over her misfortune become the routine of her mother's life. However, with all her toil and suffering, Caithleen's mother hardly ever grumbles; she accepts any responsibility she has to take instead. Once, while mashing a bucket of meal and potatoes, her mother lowered her head and cried, and resigned herself to her fate as a woman: "She was dragged down from heavy work, working to keep the place going, and at nighttime making lampshades and fire screens to make the house prettier" (8). More often than not, Caithleen's mother was inordinately loaded with manual work and household chores. Afraid that her mother might die while she was at school, Caithleen always had tears in her eyes. Ironically, on one occasion her mother was overcome with delight when her father was away from home because he was sent to the hospital to recover from his drinking sprees (10).

So intense is the mother-daughter relationship in Caithleen that she is preoccupied with the image of her mother, even long after her mother's death. Once, when finding that she spoke in the style of her mother, she was taken aback by the similarity. Caithleen disliked the close resemblance because she hated to be as miserable as her mother (77).[4] In fact, over the years, Caithleen

[4] In the later part of the trilogy, Caithleen shows her great dislike of her mother's self-sacrifice and self-devotion at the cost of her own happiness. "Hills brought a sudden thought of her mother, and

has been managing to escape from the haunting shadow of her mother, though her efforts are generally futile. She is constantly required to imitate what her mother (as well as the other Irish women) has to do to carry out her duty as a woman. An observation by Jack Holland, a friend of Caithleen, makes clear such a stereotype closely related to Caithleen: "And, my dear Caithleen, who is the image and continuation of her mother, I see no reason why you shall not return and inherit your mother's home and carry on her admirable domestic tradition" (81). Caithleen's mother is constrained by this domestic tradition, but unlike her mother who complies with the dictates of custom, Caithleen strives to free herself from conventions. Nevertheless, her efforts to grapple with domestic tradition are by no means easy, which finds compelling evidence from the recurring reminiscences of her mother. Just as the mother image looms over Caithleen, so does the phantom of domestic tradition penetrate her life: "But all the night I slept badly. I tucked my legs up under my nightgown and was shivering. I was waiting for someone to come and warm me. I think I was waiting for Mama" (170).

As a matter of fact, for Caithleen, the memory of mother-daughter relationship is intermingled with both grief and sweetness. For quite a long time, Caithleen has been troubled with her failures in the patriarchal world, yet the thought of her mother provides her with solace and generous support. Likewise, but for Caithleen's companionship, her mother would find it hard to survive the massive family burdens: "She was the best mama in the world. I told her so, and she held me very close for a minute as if she would never let me go. I was everything in the world to her, everything" (6). Saddled with heavy household chores and the responsibility to support the family, Caithleen's mother has no alternative but to brave the fact that her husband may be intoxicated like many other Irish men characterized in modern Irish literature.[5] The persistent worry about her husband, together with the obligation to look after the whole family, ruins Caithleen's mother. Tormented by the unrelenting pressure, she has a closer relationship with Caithleen

she felt the first flash of dislike she had ever experienced for that dead, over-worked woman. . . . Now suddenly she saw that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr" (476-77).

[5] Such a stereotype is ingrained in Irish literature. Examples can be found in all kinds of literary descriptions, short stories and novels in particular. James Joyce's *Dubliners* is crowded with such drunken men. Mahon's father and Dan Burke in John Synge's plays *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Shadow of the Glen* respectively also serve as good examples. Likewise, the father figure Malachy McCourt in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* is seriously addicted to alcohol, so much so that he never takes good care of his family.

because this is the only way for her to secure timely consolation and identification. In a sense, the gap of her mother's not having a dependable husband is filled in by Caithleen. On the other hand, the love and protection given by her mother compensate for the absence of a responsible father. From this perspective, the mother and the daughter are mutually dependent and, as a consequence, unite in an interlocking bond.

To what degree are the Irish influenced by their previous generations? O'Brien's observation in *Mother Ireland* in this regard is thought-provoking: "The children inherit a trinity of guilt (a Shamrock): the guilt for Christ's Passion and Crucifixion, the guilt for the plundered land, and the furtive guilt for the mother frequently defiled by the insatiable father" (19). Thus, according to O'Brien, Catholicism, nation, and family dominate the lives of modern Irish people, especially those of Irish women. While the word "trinity" suggests strong religious sentiment, the term "shamrock" connotes the unique Irish nationalistic spirit.[6] Following the decolonization efforts made by nationalists, modern Ireland is notorious for its bid to construct the nation at the cost of women's civil rights (Mayer 1-2; Sawyer 56-57; Quinn 41). In addition, the confrontation between Irish women and Catholic religion will be made clear in the following discussion, in which Caithleen is tormented by Father Hagerty, while her supposed love for God is mistakenly projected on Eugene Gaillard, her fantasized ideal lover. Moreover, the dreadful sense of guilt over the mother's being contaminated by the father

[6] For details of such a connotation, works by 19th-century Irish poet Thomas Moore are helpful. In fact, the advocacy of national spirit in Moore's *Irish Melodies* manifests itself in a series of symbols, the shamrock and the harp in particular. Apart from the shamrock that connotes Irish native spirit, Moore adopted the harp, another symbol of Ireland in musical terms, in honor of the indigenous culture. Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" pleaded for the west wind's collaboration to scatter his Romantic inspiration around the world: "Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth, / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind" (414). In a striking contrast to Shelley's spiritual breeze, Moore normally utilized the harp to compose his dirge for his colonized native land. In "Shall the Harp Then Be Silent," for instance, he asserted:

> No—faint tho' the death-song may fall from his lips,
> Tho' his Harp, like his soul, may with shadows be crost,
> Yet, yet shall it sound, 'mid a nation's eclipse,
> And proclaim to the world what a star hath been lost. (182)

In the preceding stanza, the poet-speaker wondered whether the Minstrel of Erin had to stop playing when the harp, typical symbol of Ireland, ceased to exist. Intriguingly enough, it was not long before the speaker refrained from his misgivings, and persisted in the perseverance of the harp, however hard it might be. But, unlike Shelley, who capitalized on the wind to disseminate his spiritual vision, Moore would like to make public the right and glory of his Celtic homeland. Even though colonialism clouded over Erin, in other words, the elegy from the harp hardly ever ceased. "In the calm of retreat, in the grandeur of strife, / Whether shining or clouded, still high and the same" (184).

accentuated in *Mother Ireland* haunts Caithleen. These traumatic experiences, prevailing in Irish culture, repeat and linger on in the coming days of Caithleen's life.

III. The Intimidating Father Figure

Unlike the intimate mother-daughter relationship, Caithleen's interaction with her father is terrible. Caithleen's reference to her father is always coupled with fear and abhorrence throughout the trilogy. "In fear and trembling I set off for school. I might meet him on the way or else he might come home and kill Mama" (9). Obviously, Caithleen as well as her mother suffers from her father's domestic violence. In reality, the fear of and hatred for her father recur in the trilogy. Caithleen and her father are so estranged from each other that sometimes she even takes him as a mere stranger (80). Once in a while, she argues with her father and shows her deep-seated resentment against him (107). Once, when her father came down with some disease and became feeble, Caithleen was not upset at all but rather felt excited because her father's absence provides her with a golden opportunity to have freedom (265). Interestingly, Caithleen did sympathize with her father once: "I felt sorry for him—so weak and broken, and unlovely" (252). However, such rare sympathy was gone in no time when she thought of all the suffering her mother had to endure: "Don't be an ass, stop pitying him, that's what ruined your mother's life, I told myself as I raised my hand to the black emergency cord. I was shaking like a leaf" (253). In a nutshell, the trauma caused by Caithleen's father influences Caithleen and her mother as well. As a result, Caithleen's abomination against her father is intense, so much so that she cannot forgive her father, let alone accept him and regard him lovingly as a father.

Memories of her mother's suffering, coupled with her awful experience interacting with her father, discourage Caithleen from keeping her father company. The following episode shows how Caithleen is maltreated by her own father: "He came over and gave me a punch under the chin so that my two rows of teeth clattered together, and with his wild lunatic eyes he stared at me" (27). Cathleen's father fails to take good care of her; instead, he threatens her with "punches" and "kicks," especially after some glasses of wine. This explains why Caithleen has been striving to escape from her father, though her

efforts have been mostly unsuccessful. She struggles to have some romantic lovers to shelter her from the threatening world closely associated with her father, yet ironically her attempts always get her involved with different replicas of her father. Her lovers are often old enough to be her father. The only difference is the way in which they lead her to torture. Jack Holland, a friend that likes Caithleen, is said to resemble her father. They were so much alike that Caithleen once mistook Holland for her father: "At first I thought it was Dada. They were about the same height and they both wore hats instead of caps" (11). However, unlike her father, who threatens and bullies her, Jack gives Caithleen great sense of security and protection from the intimidation of her father (13). But, despite all the striking difference, both male characters are endowed with more power and strength than Caithleen, a fact that signifies the disempowerment of women in Ireland. Another father-like figure for Caithleen in *The Country Girls* is Mr. Gentleman, a rich, married, middle-aged Frenchman and Dublin solicitor. Fascinated by Mr. Gentleman's charm, Caithleen cannot resist his flirtations. She thinks about Mr. Gentleman all the time, insomuch that she even invents some sexual fantasies about him. "I was thinking of his mouth, of the shape of it, and the taste of his tongue, while I had one short, self-conscious puff" (53). These audacious sensual accounts explain why O'Brien's works were banned in Ireland, for the stark sexual expressions of are obviously against the pure mother image preached by the government and the Catholic Church.

The disproportional sexual contrast between Caithleen and Mr. Gentleman is also manifest in their characterization. Caithleen is only an innocent girl from the countryside, whereas Mr. Gentleman comes from the higher class. Known as an elegant, French-speaking solicitor, Mr. Gentleman is mysterious and unapproachable for the provincials in the country. While he is a professional lawyer, Caithleen is nothing but an angel-like foil. "He (Mr. Gentleman) gave me chocolates, and took me to the pictures. He told me that I was the sweetest thing that ever happened to him. He said the color of my hair was wonderful, and my eyes were like real pearls and my skin like a peach in the sunlight" (61). Here the reification of women is crystal-clear because Caithleen is likened to chocolate and peach to be eaten, or the hair, the eyes, and pearls to be gazed at. In contrast, her individuality, her capability, or her intelligence as a thinking subject is dismissed. She becomes an object to be desired instead of a self-sufficient individual with her own value. Unlike Mr.

Gentleman, who is a legendary man of noble descent, Caithleen is superficial and unsophisticated. In the later part of the story, Caithleen tells her friend, Baba, that those flowery praises of her sensual beauty are entirely out of her concoction, which alludes to her internalized conception that women are meant to be pretty. That is, from the made-up story Caithleen subconsciously reinforces and reproduces the stereotypical ideology that women should make themselves beautiful simply for male gaze.

Although Mr. Gentleman promises Caithleen happiness, the idealistic prospect suggested by this father-like figure is but a dream. Caithleen is only an unworldly, ill-advised girl for Mr. Gentleman. At the end of *The Country Girls*, Caithleen feels dejected when she receives a telegram from Mr. Gentleman saying "EVERYTHING GONE WRONG. THREATS FROM YOUR FATHER. MY WIFE HAS ANOTHER NERVOUS BREAKDOWN. REGREAT ENFORCED SILENCE. MUST NOT SEE YOU" (175). Obviously, this incident demonstrates that the phantom of Caithleen's father haunts her, and Caithleen undergoes still another romantic breakdown with Mr. Gentleman, her first lover. In the ending of the first fiction, Caithleen's throes and incompetence are conspicuous; she even has to take some aspirins and endure the suffering caused by sleepless night (175). However, as a secondary, marginalized female in the stifling modern Irish society, Caithleen is given little alternative but incessant labor, suffering, and despair.

The Lonely Girl, the second fiction of the trilogy, also focuses on the female protagonist's village community, the oppressive effects of her family and her convent education, and her attempts to free herself from the diverse forms of patriarchal control. Caithleen embarks on a series of liaisons with another father-like character called Eugene Gaillard, a half-French documentary film maker. "My elbow touched his; and I had that paralyzing sensation in my legs which I hadn't felt since I'd parted from Mr. Gentleman" (186). Hierarchical oppositions such as man/woman, right/wrong, knowledge/ignorance, reason/superstition manifest themselves in their interactions. How Eugene speaks reveals his sense of superiority to the socially unsophisticated, economically modest, and intellectually disadvantaged Caithleen. "Your inadequacies, your fears, your traumas, your father," censures Eugene in an argument with Caithleen (359). In fact, in most of their interactions, Eugene serves as the instructor and does the teaching. "Eugene guarded me like a child, taught me things, gave me books to read,

and gave pleasure to my body at night" (323). Nonetheless, while giving his teaching and instruction, Eugene is consolidating his sense of superiority simultaneously. Their unbalanced status makes Caithleen ill at ease, so much so that she declares her aversion to "his strength, his pride, his self-assurance" (335).

In stark contrast to Eugene, who stands for justice, power, and knowledge, Caithleen is invariably mocked as ignorant and unintelligent. In their disputes, it is always Caithleen that makes major concessions, though she is not necessarily in the wrong (344). She can do nothing about it. The tenacious dominance of Eugene renders Caithleen subordinated all the time. Caithleen's reflection on their distinct roles once again betrays her disadvantageous position:

> And even in loving him, I remembered our difficulties, the separated, different worlds that each came from; he controlled, full of bile and intolerance, knowing everyone, knowing everything—me swayed or frightened by every wind, light-headed, mad in one eye (as he said), bred in (as he said again) 'Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery.' (345)

Thus, as Caithleen maintains, Eugene and she are from the outset people that belong to absolutely different worlds. While Eugene is constructed as an all-knowing, God-like figure, she is a mere creature misled by dumbness and barbarity. This unequal sexual hierarchy is pre-destined and further reiterated throughout the interactions between Caithleen and Eugene. To make matters worse, Eugene even regards her as a lunatic, a prejudiced stereotype typical of female characters in western literature. On several occasions, Caithleen is thought of as an undependable "red-haired woman" by Eugene, which unfairly alludes to her abnormality and insanity (331, 360).

Sad to say, while Caithleen aspires to run away from the patriarchal control from her father, her attempts to be free and happy together with Eugene plunge her into waves of disillusionment and misery. Eugene brings her not merely instruction but also impediment with regard to her self-development. Eugene's dominance over Caithleen is so overwhelming that the female protagonist keeps articulating her grievances over the persistent subordination. Caithleen recalls: "He was too articulate, too sure of

his own rightness. . . .'I'll try to educate you, *teach you how to speak*, how to deal with people, build your confidence'" (358; emphasis added). This episode makes clear that Caithleen is subordinate in education, social experience, as well as social status, which accounts for her awkwardness in articulating her ideas in Eugene's presence. In a research on Irish women conducted by David E. Schmitt, this sexual inferiority is confirmed. According to Schmitt, Irish society is predominantly manipulated by men; whereas women, especially those living in the country, recede from the spotlight to cater to the needs and standards of the patriarchal society and the Catholic Church (25).[7] The sexual inequality, which restricts Caithleen for quite a long time, prevents her from getting out of the patriarchal control. It is a pity that Caithleen's involvement in the love affair stops her from perceiving this disparity between males and females. As a consequence, she fancies all the time that Eugene will love and protect her when they are together (367). But, as the story unfolds later, this wishful thinking about love is always coupled with agony and frustration.

IV. Irish Women and Catholic Religion

The repression of the patriarchal society is seldom, if ever, assuaged by the Catholic Church and its proscriptions. On the contrary, the Catholic Church intensifies the constraint on Irish women in another direction. As a matter of fact, the influences of Catholic religion on Caithleen are everywhere to be seen in the trilogy.[8] Since she is young, guilt-ridden Caithleen has been reminded of and thus afraid of divine penalty. Caithleen's young love for Hickey, a workman, makes her embarrassed because sexual desire is forbidden for a girl of her age. She gets out of bed several times at night as "an act of penance" (4) to relieve her fear of being sentenced to hell. Besides, the pure image of Virgin Mary is so embedded in their minds that many girls, including Caithleen and her friend, Delia Sheeby, plan to be nuns when they grow up. Interestingly, being a nun becomes another escape from the troubles

[7] In contrast, Schmitt contends that women in the urban areas tend to have more self-awareness to fight for their rights, either in politics, careers, or marital affairs.

[8] Impacts of Catholic churches on Irish women have been studied by many scholars. With some minor differences, most scholars, however, agree on its detrimental effects on the self-development of Irish women. For details, please consult Evelyn Mahon 184-215; Tom Inglis 59-77; Tony Fahey 53-70.

in the secular world. As Caithleen calls to mind later, she is expected by her mother to be a nun in the future, for being a nun "was better than marrying" (67). Living in a Catholic world, Caithleen cannot help but cast her ideal dream onto the religious world, yet ironically her life in the convent engenders less happiness than disappointment. Caithleen's disappointment at her convent life arises because the monotonous and austere life practiced in the convent can never cater to her longing for love. After her mother dies in the drowning accident, Caithleen spends her mid-teen days in a convent-school, where she is constantly inculcated the importance of love, faith, and obedience. Her portrayal of the convent earlier in the story lays bare its stultifying atmosphere: "The convent was a gray stone building with hundreds of small square curtainless windows, like so many eyes spying out on the wet sinful town. There were green railings around it and high green gates that led to a dark cypress avenue" (64). This depiction of the convent life is echoed in O'Brien's short story, "Sister Imelda," which also recounts the stoic life typical of the Catholic convent: "We had returned from our long summer holiday and we were all wretched. The convent, with its high stone wall and green iron gates enfolding us again, seemed more of a prison than ever" (124). In striking contrast to the mundane world in which freedom is taken for granted, the space inside the convent is evidently made up of impoverishment, formality, and insularity consolidated by high stone walls and green iron gates. Consequently, the convent girls have been obsessed with the thought of escape.

The analogy of the convent to the prison resonates with what Foucault contends in *Discipline and Punish*. According to Foucault, the managerial transformation of the prison from the monarchical power to modern disciplinary power is epitomized in the Panopticon, a regulatory contrivance practiced near the end of the eighteenth century. While prisoners in the past were aware of their own subjection, detainees in the Panopticon are afraid of being observed from the central tower. Therefore, the prisoners internalize their fear of being scrutinized little by little and thus formulate certain self-surveillance to the benefit of the authorities. For Foucault, this sort of power and control practiced in the Panopticon is widely used in the management of the army, hospitals, schools, and religious institutes (195-228). To a certain extent, the convent can be regarded as an embodiment of the "Panopticon." Moderation, decorum, and discipline are highly esteemed in the

convent, so Caithleen and the other girls are coached to behave themselves without the slightest thought of bodily pleasure. The rules in the convent are strict, so the girls keep crying and sobbing under the covers at night. "Everyone seemed to be eating and crying for their mothers" (70). Judging from this light, the convent is not so much a haven for these Irish girls as another prison that deprives them of their human nature. However, the dull life in the convent cannot discourage Caithleen from craving for her ideal dream land: "It was nice to lie there watching the stars, waiting for them to fade or to go out, or to flare up into the brilliant firework. Waiting for something to happen in the deathly, unhappy silence" (70). Stuck in the Catholic convent, Caithleen seeks to envisage her brighter future by looking out of the window for the sparkling stars. The fate of the stars—either to die out or to explode with magnificent gleams—corresponds to her future. Harsh as the convent life is, Caithleen is not dismayed but rather waits hopefully for something fantastic to happen. But, she is doomed to despair because, as the plot unfolds, her hope for the future is ruined time and again by male partners such as Mr. Gentleman, Eugene Gaillard.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault contends that the manipulation of sex characterizes the unbalanced disciplinary power relations between authorities and dominated subjects. The Catholic convent is characterized by its strict rules of sex and pleasure; however, in O'Brien's works, religious restrictions are not only delineated but challenged. For example, in the trilogy, Caithleen is subordinated in the convent, but she tries hard to break free from the yoke. In addition, the stereotypes of the convent and the nun in "Sister Imelda" are inculcated in the consciousness of the convent girls. The unidentified narrator recounts the bleak life in the convent as follows: "We knew something about the nuns' routine. It was rumored that they wore itchy wool underwear, ate dry bread for breakfast, rarely had meat, cakes, or dainties, kept certain hours of strict silence with each other" (131). As we can see, Catholic dogmas shape the nuns into religious robots without the slightest thought of carnal desire. Overburdened with the overwhelming love of God, nuns are educated to discard their secular love to lead virtuous lives. However, the nuns and the convent girls that naively abide by the rules of the church are a far cry from O'Brien's female characters. O'Brien is never contented with the mere depiction of the harsh realities of convent life. Instead, she is bent on deconstructing the restrictions imposed on women. As

Mahony Christina Hunt argues, "Some of the most vivid contrasts in O'Brien's fiction are accompanied by such juxtaposition of sheltered, expectant girlhood and the liberating, but daunting range of experience her young women undergo in the outside world as young adults" (213). In line with Hunt's argument, the suffocating atmosphere of the convent aside, the narrator in "Sister Imelda" also draws readers' attention to the unconventional depiction of sex and pleasure rarely seen in modern Irish literature. "Sister Imelda" is fraught with not merely rigid convent traditions but also the erotic fantasies triggered by pretty Sister Imelda. The elaborate accounts of Sister Imelda's physical features bear witness to the sexual scenarios of the convent:

> When I got back later, she was sitting on the edge of the table swaying her legs. There was something reckless about her pose, something defiant. It seemed as if any minute she would take out a cigarette case, snap it open, and then archly offer me one. . . .I wonder if she had supplanted my mother, and I hoped not, because I had aimed to outstep my original world and take my place in a new and hallowed one. (129-30)

These descriptions can never remind people of the religious world. What appeals to the narrator is not Sister Imelda's divinity but her unique sexual attractions. Captivated by the nun's audacity and beauty, the narrator develops an unusual secular attachment to her. But, as the narrator indicates, her relationship with Sister Imelda is different from that between her mother and her. Unlike the pure mother-daughter relationship, her love for Sister Imelda is quasi-homosexual.

A closer bond is established between Sister Imelda and the narrator step by step. They share their inner feelings, exchange gifts, and play secretly together. Once, after the narrator's drama performance on stage, Sister Imelda greets her with "a shower of kisses" (133). As their intimacy grows, the narrator seems to perceive Sister Imelda's happiness amid the monotonous convent life. "Yet she was radiant as if such austerity was joyful. Maybe she was basking in some secret realization involving her and me" (133). However, the convent is never an ideal place for their love to develop. Conventions and religious creeds keep the nun from getting in touch with the student narrator. Torn between the conflict between divine love and secular love, Sister Imelda

is eventually forced to follow religious rules by suppressing her love and desire. Her intentional indifference dismays the budding narrator, who is so enraged as to proclaim that "convents were dungeons and no doubt about it" (134). Paradoxically, the secular love developed between Sister Imelda and the narrator consummates in their service of God. As the narrator recounts: "I made up my mind that I would be a nun and that though we might never be free to express our feelings, we would be under the same roof, in the same cloister, in mental and spiritual conjunction of our lives" (136-37).

The strict discipline imposed on convent girls aside, the constraint of Catholic religion also arises in stifling Caithleen's sexual desire. In the later part of *The Lonely Girl*, when she is found to be together with Eugene, Caithleen is strongly condemned by Father Hagerty as well as her father. She is scolded by Father Hagerty for "walking the path of moral damnation" (269). When accused of sin because of her liaison with Eugene, Caithleen, who is so infuriated at Father Hagerty's allegation as to question his indictment. However, Caithleen is rebuked right away: "This man is dangerous company. He has no faith, no moral standards. He married a woman and then divorced her—whom God hath joined together" (269). In spite of Caithleen's attempt to justify herself, Father Hagerty preached a range of grim sermons to her: "God is testing your love; God has allowed this man to cross your path and tempt you, so that you will reaffirm your love for Him. You have only to ask, and He will give you the grace to resist this great temptation" (270). Obviously, the hierarchical dichotomy between Father Hagerty and Caithleen is confirmed from the outset. Father Hagerty, as an agent of God, manages to interrogate Caithleen mainly due to her secular love with the divorced Eugene. Caithleen is invariably put in a relatively underprivileged position because she is always the one questioned by the superior authorities, be it her father, her lover, or the Catholic Father. That is, her affliction derives from triple sources: her father, the Catholic Father, and her idealized father-like lovers, who collaborate and contribute to her irrevocable subordination and damnation.

Baba's criticism of the Catholic religion illuminates the subjugation of Irish women. According to Baba, the Catholic Church unfavorably imposes restrictions on women. For instance, Pope John II persistently warns women of the danger of sin, but he never takes into account the detriment to the happiness of women. Baba contends that the Pope is responsible for "keeping women in bondage, sexual bondage above all" (522). In a conversation with

her husband, Baba articulates her opposition to the disempowerment of women in the Catholic religion. As Baba remarks, God is to blame for the subordination of women because he hates women. "And Jesus, who snubbed your mother, you hate them more. Roaming around all that time with a bunch of men, fishing; and Sermons on the Mount. Abandoning women" (473). In other words, for Baba, the Catholic religion is dominated by the patriarchal power, including God, Jesus Christ, the clergy, and so on. It is a pity that these male authorities of religion seldom take good care of the female disciples because they pay little attention to female concerns. To make matters worse, female characters in O'Brien's trilogy are manipulated and repressed by the mechanism of religion. This can be found in the unbalanced power relations between Caithleen and Father Hagerty. Foucault's ideas of power, sex, and confession are illuminating in our understanding of this imbalance. Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality* that the book aims to "define the regime of power—knowledge—pleasure" in the analysis of the discourse on human sexuality in the West (11). For Foucault, sexuality provides the access to which we can understand how social power relations are produced and sustained, and how the subjects are manipulated and resist. Among others, the constitution of the body is widely used for the control. According to Foucault, one striking example of the bodily control is the confessional mode in the Catholic churches. Confession, Foucault argues, works as an important tool in disciplining the Christian subjects. By turning recourse to the restriction of desire, the confessional mode in Christianity reaffirms the hierarchical opposition between the clergy and the confessor. Whereas the questioner or the religious authority dominates the speaking subject by probing and passing judgment on the matter, the confessed speaker is always and already subjected to the supervision of the religious discourse (*History of Sexuality* 23). This kind of reinforced reconversion to religion proves to be a useful strategy by which the Christian church consolidates its sovereignty over its subjects. Such a theory of confession proposed by Foucault helps illustrate how Caithleen in O'Brien's trilogy is unfairly positioned in the religious interrogation. As the previous conversation between Caithleen and Father Hagerty demonstrates, the female protagonist's sexual desire is rationalized as God-given trial and temptation. Caithleen is required to remove from sexual enticement to the embrace of God's grace. The hierarchy between Caithleen and Father Hagerty is obvious because Caithleen's actions are always evaluated by the clergyman

rather than the other way around. This example echoes Foucault's theory in *The History of Sexuality* that in confession, it is the listener rather than the confessed speaker that has "the power to forgive, console, and direct" (66). This listener, normally a male clergyman, is "not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of truth" (67). From this perspective, sex and the body serve as another legitimate agency of male control.

As a matter of fact, the dominance of her father and Father Hagerty aside, Caithleen's pressure comes from everywhere in the conservative society. Even when she is away from her father, everything associated with her is kept under surveillance. For instance, an anonymous letter written to Caithleen's father reveals the way Caithleen's life is monitored by the patriarchal eyes. "It is high time you knew about your daughter and the company she keeps. I hope I am not too late in warning you, as I would not like to see a nice Catholic girl ruined by a dirty foreigner" (246). To some degree, this anonymous letter represents the surveillance of the patriarchal society as a whole. Rigid Catholic doctrines are normalized as the benchmark to domesticate and penalize its subjects. Under the circumstances, as Foucault maintains in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, an intricate web of authoritative regulation is bound up with family, religion, society, and nation. Faced with such overwhelming power prevailing in the patriarchal Irish society, Caithleen is constantly driven into the corner in her everyday life.

V. Patriarchal Oppression vs. Opposition to Patriarchy

The hostile, man-centered socio-cultural milieu surrounding Caithleen does not ruin her, for amid so much depression and frustration, she never fails to seek the way out or even manages to strike back. The rigid convent life cannot prevent her from looking forward to a promising future by watching the starry night. Caithleen does not succumb to the demands of the patriarchal society but rather chooses to follow her instinct with a view to making her dream come true. The repression of patriarchal power and its multifarious exertions are challenged by Caithleen in her pursuit of sex and love. In fact, since she was young, Caithleen has been aware of her position as a self-autonomous individual. Unlike most Irish girls that play their traditional roles, she pays attention to her physical advantages and claims herself as an

individual human being. At one time, when wearing a new pair of shoes for the forthcoming Christmas, Caithleen expressed her thrill outright. "I looked in the wardrobe mirror at myself and admired my legs a thousand times" (86). Caithleen has such strong self-consciousness that she insists on her own choice regardless of other people's advice. Once, on her way to back to Dublin with Baba, Caithleen made it clear that she did not care so much about what others judged her:

> 'We'll look for one,' I said, and we went down the corridor, giggling and giving strangers the 'So what' look. I suppose it was then we began that phase of our lives as the giddy country girls brazening the big city. People looked at us and then looked away again, as though they had just discovered that we were naked or something. But we didn't care. We were young and, we thought, pretty. (121)

In a sense, this incident brings to mind the enduring subordination imposed on Irish women. Nevertheless, the derision coming from other passengers in the carriage is disregarded by Caithleen and Baba, the two fun-loving female protagonists that have learned to live more for themselves than for others. In consequence, in spite of pressures coming from the patriarchal society in multiple forms, rural female characters in O'Brien's works are inclined to be brave fighting against the overwhelmingly repressive forces. But, although Caithleen is courageous in working for a world of her own, her unvarying pursuit of self-identity is often hampered. Since her early childhood, Caithleen has not been permitted to make her own decision, which reaffirms the marginal status most modern Irish women are bound up with. At one time, while she was trying to recollect her preceding days, Caithleen was taken aback to realize that self-determination was a total stranger to her. "But I could not decide; I had never made decisions in my life. My clothes had always been bought for me, my food decided on, even my outings were decided by Baba" (232). On several occasions, Caithleen perceives her incompetence to assert her individuality. She fails not because she is not able to tackle anything in the real life, but because traditionally women, or more specifically women in Ireland, are not allowed to be self-sufficient and self-autonomous. As a result, Caithleen has to make great efforts to learn how

to live independently.

However, patriarchal traditions and discipline cannot suppress women's aspiration for self-identity. Such a desire is manifest in Caithleen's endeavor to defy the long-term prejudice against women. The resisting counter-discourse appropriated by Caithleen echoes Foucault's theory of the productive force of power relations in *Power/Knowledge*. In contrast to most theorists that emphasize the constraining effects of power, Foucault stresses the reproduction of power opposite to the dominant power discourse (119). Caithleen has been coached to be submissive; however, conventions and regulation are constantly dismissed because of her unquenchable longing for a better tomorrow. Caithleen has been preoccupied with this ambivalence about whether to leave or stay in the oppressive countryside in the west of Ireland. In *The Country Girls*, when she worked in Dublin at a grocery, Caithleen once recalled the scenes that reminded her of her hometown while listening to the words of Mr. Burns, her employer:

> I saw the bog water and the bog lilies and the blackened patches of ground where we had made fires to boil a kettle, and the heather which brushed my ankles and the great limestone ridges that rose out of the brown and purple earth. . . .The edge of the bog lake was fringed with bulrushes, and at certain times of the year their heads were a soft brown plush. . . .At the far edge of the lake there was a belt of poplar trees, shutting out the world. The world I wanted to escape into. And now that I had come into the world, that scene of bogs and those country faces were uppermost thoughts. (137)

In a sense, these romantic vistas reminiscent of her home village testify to Caithleen's attachment to custom and tradition. In "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Yeats is summoned by the "lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore" (*Collected Poems* 43). In a similar vein, Caithleen is unwittingly beckoned by the indigenous bog land, the stunning limestone ridges, the bulrushes, and the poplar trees. However, these scenes are anything but mere descriptions of beautiful attractions. To some degree, they also help disclose

the protagonist's identity.[9] Caithleen's ambivalence is so strong that she is mentally split between two worlds—the conservative, bucolic world she comes from and the modernized secular world she yearns for in Dublin and London. Although Caithleen struggles to get away from the smothering country in her teens, somehow she cannot but miss the idyllic wilderness of her hometown when she leads a hectic lifestyle in London. The oscillations between the past and the future, between male-dominated ideology and female fantasy highlight the quandary of Caithleen throughout the trilogy. Caithleen thirsts for her ideal love when entrapped in the quagmire of tradition, but she cannot keep herself from the encroachment of her past memory, her hometown, and the patriarchal value system as a whole because the influence of male-dominated patriarchy is so strong.

No matter how powerful the force of tradition can be, Caithleen's yearning for love and her craving for happiness contribute to her grappling with the Irish patriarchy that comes in various forms. When Caithleen is found to have a romance with Eugene, her father forces her to leave Eugene without any communication. Regardless of her father's barbarism, Caithleen is determined to be her own master: "I'm my own boss. I'll do what I like" (246). This response to patriarchal control is mirrored in many actions taken by Caithleen in her interaction with Father Hagerty and Eugene. Although she is accused of having an affair with Eugene by Father Hagerty, Caithleen is fearless and works hard to defend her position. Father Hagerty's criticism of Caithleen is of little use because Caithleen refuses to be saddled with Catholic

[9] With the introduction of cultural geography, more and more scholars are taking heed of the relation between literature and geography, and drawing insights from the mutual study of these two fields. Scholars like Christopher L. Salter and William J. Lloyd, for example, point out in *Landscape in Literature* that since the nineteen seventies geographical study has been quite changed with the inclusion of literary delineations of landscapes. For them, landscapes in literature even present a more authentic world than those recorded in traditional geographical texts (2-5). It is now believed that along with the study of landscapes in literature comes the understanding of one's identity, be it national, sexual, or cultural. Landscape, for example, is regarded as something closely associated with one's national identity. For many critics, with the creation of an account on an identifiable region, writers help their fellowmen to muster their mutual identity by returning from "the unfamiliar to the familiar" (Barnes and Duncan 11-12). In addition, the dominant image of the west of Ireland, along with Catholicism, suggested N.C. Johnson, was crucial in the late nineteenth-century construction of nationalist consciousness (159). In the wake of such nationalistic awareness, the west of Ireland, especially the Aran Islands, becomes the normalized and idealized landscape. The Aran Islands are chosen as the cultural sanctuary by Irish nationalists mainly because these three islands are geographically remote from colonial encroachment, linguistically unalloyed with English, and culturally intact from material deterioration. In Irish people's struggle with the British colonizers, these islands then become the expedient imaginary homeland for nationalists, political and cultural alike.

doctrines and social conventions. As the narrator shows: "Her (Caithleen's) aunt seemed to think that everything was all right now, and that I was out of danger. The funny thing was that I was more determined than ever to get away" (272).

Caithleen's struggle against the patriarchal dominance also happens in her interaction with Eugene in the last book of the trilogy, *Girls in their Married Bliss*. Caithleen's strife with her father and Father Hagerty is fierce, and her contention with Eugene is much more destructive. As delineated in the end of *The Lonely Girl*, Eugene is prejudiced in thinking women cannot be self-autonomous as thinking subjects. Thus, he told Cathileen: "You are incapable of thinking. Why don't you get up and wash your face and put some powder on? Do something. Sink your inadequacy into washing walls or mending my socks or conquering your briary nature" (359). Clearly, Eugene belittles Caithleen and women in general. For him, Caithleen as a woman can only serve as a flower-like blockhead. He, wittingly or unwittingly, reifies Caithleen by advising her to mind her superficial beauty or dedicate herself to manual labor. These suggestions lay bare the stereotypical image of women advocated in a traditional, patriarchal society. What is more, the reference to her "briary nature" is suggestive of Eugene's burlesque of Caithleen as an unruly lunatic to be conquered and subdued. In other words, Eugene thinks that women, who are greatly swayed by their emotion, irrationality, and incompetence, are kept from remarkable achievement. Such a caricature of women's incapacity has been criticized by feminists. In her essay titled "Sorties," Hélène Cixous specifies a set of hierarchical oppositions that have dominated Western thought. According to Cixous, a series of binary oppositions such as culture/nature, head/heart, form/matter, speaking/writing, man/woman are prevailing in western civilization (90-91). And in the oppositions, whereas the former categories are constantly privileged, the latter ones are unfavorably subordinated. For example, women tend to be represented as the "Other" that take the second place within a patriarchal society, a prejudice that is pointed out by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Therefore, as the inferior other sex, women cannot escape from the manipulation of the patriarchal power. This helps explain why Caithleen suffers so much in her attempts to get rid of the tenacious patriarchal obstacles that surround her.

Caithleen is passive in the presence of Eugene, her dominant husband.

However, she tries hard to terminate her plight by moving away from Dublin to London.[10] In a sense, the movement to London signals Chithleen's pursuit of a better tomorrow as well as her self-identity, but her attempt is not successful because she cannot entirely free herself from man's control. Not long before her departure from Eugene, Caithleen still naively considers that her husband will be eager to see her after receiving her farewell letter. She is convinced that Eugene will "love me and want to protect me again," (367) only to find his indifference to her leaving. Finally, Eugene does not come to fetch her as she expects. Torn between longing and hatred due to her husband's apathy, Caithleen gets to realize that she is too optimistic about love. Near the end of *The Lonely Girl*, she matures, turning "sadder and wiser" because suffering has taught her to change. "Even Baba notices that I'm changing" (377). However, Caithleen's change is not complete. "What Baba doesn't know is that I am finding my feet, and when I'm able to talk I imagine that I won't be so alone, but maybe that too is an improbable dream" (377). The disappointment caused by her unequal relationship with Eugene changes her thought from idealized romantic dream to self-independence But, as the female speaker perceives, the awakening is never easy because her decision to change may only be a dream in the long run. Ironically, Caithleen's father is delighted with her decision to leave Dublin and Eugene, insomuch that he praises her daughter for being loyal to her family and the Catholic religion, and gives Caithleen fifty pounds as a reward (367). However, as the last fiction shows, Caithleen's movement to London cannot promise her everlasting happiness because the operations of patriarchy embodied in the conflict between Caithleen and Eugene will surface in more dramatic ways afterwards.

The title of the third fiction, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, is ironical because Caithleen seldom experiences happiness from her marriage. Caithleen and Baba are both married now, but instead marrying for love, Baba weds for

[10] Emigration has always been a method for Irish people to deal with their domestic problems. The Great Famine in 1845 not only claimed roughly the lives of one million Irish people but forced about two million Irish people to leave Ireland. It is estimated that since the eighteen twenties, half of the population of Ireland chose to emigrate from Ireland (McCormack 195-97). Even after their independence in 1948, people in Ireland saw economic recession and continual emigration. What distinguishes Irish emigration from those of other European countries, however, is the large number of female emigrants. In mid-twentieth century Ireland, there were more female emigrants than male emigrants, a phenomenon unique in Europe at that time (616). Emigration appears to be a necessary evil to which Irish women turn for changing their disempowered social and economic status.

the huge financial support provided by her husband, a rich alcoholic sloven, while Caithleen is kept disheartened by Eugene, the father-like figure she adores as depicted in *The Lonely Girl*. It is noteworthy that, unlike the previous two fictions, Baba rather than Caithleen is the narrator in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. This arrangement may suggest that O'Brien plans to sketch Caithleen's agony from a more objective point of view. In this way, readers can better observe the way Caithleen suffers and understand why she is stuck in the marsh of marriage. Baba's narration in the following displays how Caithleen is subject to marital bondage: "Her life like a chapter of the inquisition. He wanted her to stay indoors all the time and nurse his hemorrhoids" (387).[11] Clearly, although Caithleen struggles and temporarily breaks free of the male authorities embodied by her father and Father Hagerty in the provincial village of western Ireland, her marriage to Eugene confines her in still another way. The participants may be different, but the nature of patriarchal control is almost the same. Thus, Caithleen's dream to end the patriarchal subjection is shattered just like before.

Depressed at the monotonous life with Eugene, Caithleen thinks about change again. Since there is no more love between them, Caithleen is tempted to explore her life by having another extra-marital affair with a man called Duncan. However, this affair with Duncan ruins her relationship with Eugene when the adultery comes to light. During this period, Caithleen often feels scared and insecure. Her interaction with the outside world divulges her anxiety:

> Outside, they could hear the splatter of snow falling on the greenhouse. The wind began to howl. For some reason she thought of a dog she'd once known as a child, who had taken fits and had been locked up in an outhouse. She had feared that the dog would break loose and do terrible damage to them, just as now she knew the wind was intending to do harm. (393)

[11] Such confinement of women within a limited space is much criticized in many feminist works. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, the woman character is advised by her husband, a doctor, to undergo the so-called rest cure in order to recover from her mental illness. The rest cure, from a Foucauldian perspective, actually connotes the controlling desire of the man in power, be it man or doctor or here in this case the male clinical professional embodied in the husband.

Set against the bleak background, Caithleen's deeply-felt desolation is self-evident. In addition, together with the chill inside and outside her are the menace from the dog and the wind, which relates her to the unhappy memory in the past and her apprehension at the present. This fear and nervousness foreshadows the approach of something terrible. A cold war between Eugene and Caithleen stays for some time. Though they share the same bed in the same room, there is little interaction, nor love between them. Their crisis is illuminated in the ensuing episode recounted by Baba: "Once, she stayed on in the morning, and in his sleep he touched her and drew back suddenly, as if he were an animal who had just touched an electric fence and received an appalling shock" (403). The analogy between the animal and the electric fence signifies their strained connection. Failing to bear the loveless and even intimidating life, Caithleen feels exhausted and depressed: "For the first time she looked old, really old" (403).

Caithleen's pleasure and confidence die out due to Eugene's apathy and hatred. For the first time, she knows that Eugene has lost his affection for her. To make matters worse, she is hit and threatened by Eugene to take her son away after the affair with Duncan is uncovered. Driven by desperation, Caithleen is regretful and writes Eugene a letter of apology, acknowledging that "he was her buoy, her teacher, the good god from whose emanations she gained all" (409). In fact, Caithleen's stress comes not merely from Eugene but also from Frank, Baba's husband, who rationalizes Eugene's violence by commenting that "he was an honest man and would let no loose woman hide in his house" (419). The term "loose woman" attributed to Caithleen is not in the least unusual, for in the preceding part when Caithleen is suspected of unfaithfulness, Eugene refers to all women as "bitches" (401). These incidents illustrate how women are imagined as sexually and thus morally vulnerable in the male-biased society. This stereotype coined in the patriarchal culture becomes the norm internalized in all members of that society. Unable to resist the compelling internalization of this patriarchal value judgment, eventually Caithleen surrenders, brings her son back to Eugene, and repents her misbehaviors (421). Bereft and disheartened, she supports herself financially by taking a part-time job in the cleaners, but the whole-new life of her own without her son and her husband nearby makes Caithleen deranged, partly due to her inability to face the lonely life and partly due to the unendurable exclusion from her long-cherished happiness. To assuage her agony, Caithleen

resorts to many people for help, including witches, fortune-tellers, sages, faith healers, but in vain. Troubled by her serious mental breakdown, she has no choice but to go to a psychiatrist for treatment. Caithleen's dilemma at this stage is made clear via Baba's narration:

> The worst bit was when she started accusing herself, said she was ashamed of being miserable when there was war and drought and famine and holocausts. She kept jumping from one thing to another, said she couldn't pray anymore, mumbled petitions to St. Anthony but felt a hypocrite. Then she quoted Van Gogh, said he wanted to paint infinity. I thought, her ear will be off next. Asked me what I thought was infinity, if there was something more to life. She said it was the emptiness that was the worst, the void. (528-29)

The unusual sentence structures used by Baba suggest that the narrator as well as Caithleen falls into certain mental disintegration. The ungrammatical and convoluted lines connote confusion and fragments. It is very likely that the narrator describes the story in this way to draw our attention to the corresponding disorder manifested in Caithleen's speech and behavior. Pathetically, Caithleen cannot work out the reason for her loneliness and wretchedness even at the final stage of her life. Neither can she secure any assistance by praying, for she gets to realize that praying means nothing more than hypocrisy. The allusion to Van Gogh and his cut ear helps arouse one's pity and fear, especially when the truth is taken into account that Caithleen, just like her mother, is drowned after several attempted suicides.

Caithleen struggles all her life to resist patriarchal oppression coming from different sources, yet she fails time and again in her attempts. From childhood to early adulthood, Caithleen's life is blighted by her parents' unhappy marriage. In striking contrast to her mother's kindness and thoughtfulness, her father's brutality and irresponsibility provokes her repulsion. As a consequence, Caithleen tries every means possible to run away from her father's control by resorting to several male lovers for help. The shadow of her mother's misery, however, lingers on and troubles her. Neither the love affair with Mr. Gentleman nor the marriage to Eugene grants Caithleen her long-awaited happiness. Father Hagerty's intrusion into her

romance with Eugene is obviously another form of patriarchal control embellished with the religious coating. She is extremely disillusioned with Eugene when her efforts to work for a happy marriage fail. Baba argues that Caithleen's problem lies in her affiliation with "Father": "Father—the crux of her dilemma. . . .I realize she was in the fucking wilderness. Born there. Hadn't the reins to haul herself out. Should have gone to night school, learned a few things, a few mottos such as 'Put thy trust in no man'" (531). Baba's assertion that Caithleen is too much under the sway of male dominance is thought-provoking. However, her ignorance of Caithleen's hard work to get out of the patriarchal control does not do justice to Caithleen. Paradoxically, Ireland, a land that has traditionally been feminized as a woman, is dominated by men instead of women. As a result, this feminized motherland cannot provide sufficient support for Caithleen and fails to save her from despair and devastation.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

Can Irish women speak? A comparative study of the W. B. Yeats/Lady Gregory relationship may divulge significant implications. While Yeats is universally regarded as the spokesman of the Irish Renaissance and the symbol of modern Irish literature, Lady Gregory is often downplayed as the helping maid of the Celtic Revival movement. In other words, Lady Gregory's importance in the Irish Renaissance is arbitrarily overlooked (Fogarty 101). Nuala O'Faolain's comment reaffirms the subordination of Irish women and woman writers as well. "Modern Irish literature is dominated by men so brilliant in their misanthropy. . . .the self-respect of Irish women is radically and paradoxically checkmated by respect for an Irish national achievement" (132). However, the fact that women living in early modern Irish nationalism are marginalized does not necessarily lead women to the impasse where female speech is impossible. O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* foregrounds an alternative to the male-dominated discourse, not least because the series is exclusively articulated by the female protagonists—the first two fictions by Caithleen, and the third by Baba. It is this very narrative style that renders the outrageously patriarchal violence all the more conspicuous and to a certain extent lessened.

To support my textual analysis of O'Brien's trilogy, I have turned to

Foucault's discussion of sex, power, knowledge, discipline, and punishment. Foucault's theory of a de-centered, all-pervasive knowledge-power or "discourse" has often been used in combination with feminist critiques in analyzing how socio-political power operates, and how people try to change their social relationships based on gender, class, and race. What is most significant, Foucault suggests in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, is not the *agent* of power but rather the pervasively localized operation of power relations which are never stable but intermingled in the capillary webs of power struggles, and thus undergoing incessant transformation (92-93). Combined with these localized practices of power relations is Foucault's idea of the disciplinary enforcement of surveillance. In *Discipline and Punish*, he traces the history of the penal system, pointing out that it is more efficient to place people under scrutiny than to subject them to carnal punishment: thus in the modern penal system, new mechanisms of surveillance emerge in barracks, hospitals, prisons, and schools to replace the traditional forms of punishment that employ physical torture. This internalized form of punishment is more effective because those in custody are plunged into a state of self-imprisonment and self-surveillance (*Discipline and Punish* 104-12). The female protagonists, Caithleen and Baba, in O'Brien's *The Country Girls' Trilogy* are indeed ensnared within the intricate webs of patriarchal power relations. By applying Foucault's theories of power, discipline, and punishment in this paper, the ways in which Caithleen and Baba are conditioned by family, religion, and society have been investigated. In addition to doing a textual analysis of O'Brien's trilogy, I have also examined the image of Ireland and Irish women in her autobiography, *Mother Ireland*. O'Brien's short story "Sister Imelda" reproduces her earlier *Country Girls' Trilogy* in depicting the woman fighter and survivor in the face of a menacing patriarchy, Catholic religion, and sterile Irish society. Following the depiction of Irish women's troubles, the last section discusses the actively "resisting" female characters created by O'Brien, more specifically their production of a female counter-discourse. While Foucault discusses the intimidating micro-politics of the dominant discourse, the seminal part of his theory of power consists in his conviction that power produces both subjugation and production: it is used not merely as a means of control but also as the medium through which the underprivileged fight back and gain control. Unlike traditional theorists who emphasize the absolutely deterministic attributes of

power relations, Foucault refuses to follow the stereotype and elucidates the potential reversion and reproduction of power mechanisms. This counter-discourse is possible simply because, as he asserts, the centers of power relations are power-struggle battlefields always in the process of being challenged, debated, and even replaced (*Power/Knowledge* 119). Foucault explains further the connection between power and discourse:

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (*History of Sexuality* 100-01)

Foucault's dynamic theory of power is helpful in developing my discussion of the complex interaction (conflict but also compromise) between male domination and female subversion in *The Country Girls' Trilogy*. This emphasis on the constructive effects of power and resistance corresponds to my reading of Caithleen in *The Country Girls' Trilogy*, who, in spite of her repression amid the patriarchal systems such as family and religion, manages to fight hard against the confining systems, codes or discourses. Caithleen thus endeavors not to replicate the submissive role her mother plays, though this effort could also lead to certain "reactive forces." Her affairs with Mr. Gentleman and Eugene Gaillard prove to be a tough challenge, for in the process of their romance, Caithleen is not only dealing with individual characters but with the mechanism of patriarchal ideology of mid-century Irish society. Facing these various hardships, the female protagonist grasps every opportunity to escape from the ruthless confinement imposed upon women. From this perspective, Irish women are not irrevocably doomed to fall victim to the male oppression without any means of resistance. On the contrary, they are potentially capable of both reevaluating the male discourse and regaining their own subjective speaking position. Thus, Foucault's theory is thought-provoking in understanding the ways in which female characters like Caithleen and Baba try through various strategies to reclaim their own voice, subjectivity or self-identity. This emphasis on the strategy by which a

woman might move toward or into a "counter-discourse" and thus, potentially find her own identity as a certain sexual difference may open up a potential location for the woman outside of traditional patriarchal oppositions. Just as Irish women's position in their society has been rapidly changing since the nineteen seventies, so have feminist theories been moving away from the goal of "reversing" the male-over-female hierarchy toward a model which, having broken down all such hierarchies—in a move suggestive of Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault (whose all-pervasive power can "oppose itself")—takes woman's identity as her position outside or beyond male logic (logos) and make her distinction as an autonomous entity possible.

Conservative and dependent, Caithleen falls victim to the ever-deepening whirlpool of patriarchy, against which Baba fights incessantly for excitement and exploration without hesitation. Indeed, while Caithleen tends to be more reserved in her attack of the injustice imposed on women, Baba is an outspoken critic of sexual inequality. If Caithleen is on behalf of the traditional, underprivileged women, then Baba in a striking contrast symbolizes the "Laugh of the Medusa" that strikes back, endeavoring to petrify the monolithic masculine Irish culture. Even though Caithleen is often forced to be obedient to the patriarchal Irish society, the seeds of resistance and revolution are planted solidly in her mind. In consequence, though failing to make dramatic change to the *status quo* of women, Caithleen keeps struggling to get out of the quagmire she is in. On the other hand, it is Baba rather than Caithleen who survives at the end of the series, and has the final say (532). Although Caithleen cannot reclaim her right to speak, Baba as the speaking subject of the final fiction to a certain extent takes charge of it. The efforts made by Caithleen and Baba to reconsolidate their female identity by speaking for themselves distinguish O'Brien from other traditional Irish writers, males and females alike, in the depiction of women. And the different voices of O'Brien's woman characters will be amplified by the woman writers that emerge and thrive in Ireland beginning from 1970s.

Works Cited

Barnes, Trevor. J., and James S. Duncan, eds. *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Cixous, Hélène. "Sorties" Trans. Ann Liddle. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1981. 90-98. Print.

Eckley, Grace. *Edna O'Brien*. Cranbury: Associated UP, 1974. Print.

Fahey, Tony. "Religion and Sexual Culture in Ireland." *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories*. Ed. Frazer X. Eder, Lesley A. Hall and Gert Hekma. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. 53-70. Print.

Fannin, Hilary. "Still Writing after All These Years." *Irish Times* 9 May 2009: 7. Print.

Fogarty, Anne. "A Woman of the House": Gender and Nationalism in the Writings of Augusta Gregory. *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*. Ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama, 2000. 100-22. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print.

——. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Trans & Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon, 1980. Print.

——. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.

Greenwood, Amanda. *Edna O'Brien*. Devon: Northcote House P, 2003. Print.

Huber, Werner. "Myth and Motherland: Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*." *A Small Nation's Contribution to the World*. Ed. Donald E. Morse, Csilla Bertha, and Istvan Palefy. Debrecen: Lajos Kossuth U, 1993. 175-81. Print.

Hunt, Mahony Christina. *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1998. Print.

Inglis, Tom. "Religion, Identity, State, and Society." *The Cambridge Campinion to Modern Irish Culture*. Ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 59-77. Print.

Johnson, N. C. "Building a Nation: An Examination of the Irish Gaeltacht Commission Report of 1926." *Journal of Historical Geography* 19

(1993): 157-68. Print.

Kilfeather, Siobhan. "Irish Feminism." *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. Ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 96-116. Print.

Mahon, Evelyn. "Women's Rights and Catholicism in Ireland." *Mapping the Women's Movement*. Ed. Monica Threlfall. London: Verso, 1996. 184-215. Print.

Mayer, Tamer. "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Natio*n. Ed. Tamer Mayer. London: Routledge, 2000. 1-22. Print.

McCormack, W. J., ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. Malden: Blackwell, 1999. Print.

Moore, Thomas. *Moore's Irish Melodies: The Illustrated 1846 Edition*. New York: Dover P, 2000. Print.

O'Brien, Edna. *Mother Ireland*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 1978. Print.

——. "Sister Imelda." *A Fanatic Heart: Selected Stories*. London: Phoenix, 2003. Print.

——. *The Country Girls Trilogy*. New York: Penguin, 1987. Print.

O'Faolain, Nuala. "Irish Women and Writing in Modern Ireland." *Irish Women: Image and Achievement. Women in Irish Culture from Earliest Times.* Ed. Eilean Ni Chuilleanain. Dublin: Attic P, 1985. 129-44. Print.

Pelan, Rebecca. "Edna O'Brien's 'Stage-Irishness' Persona: An 'Act' of Resistance." *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*: 19.1 (1993): 67-78. Print.

Quinn, Antoinette. "Cathleen ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish National Theater." *Gender and Sexuality in Modrn Ireland*. Ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Vallulis. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997. 39-59. Print.

Salter, Christopher L., and William J. Lloyd. *Landscape in Literature*. Washington: Association of American Geographers, 1989. Print.

Sawyer, Roger. *'We Are But Women': Women in Ireland's History*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Schmitt, David E. *The Irony of Irish Democracy: The Impact of Political Culture on the Administrative and Democratic Political Development in Ireland*. Lexinton: D.C. Heath, 1973. Print.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*. Ed. Zachary

Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Rev. 2nd ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. Print.